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The Christmas Story in Art

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A PICTURE BOOK

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On the cover
The Adoration of the Magi. Detail from an embroidered chasuble.
English, First Third of the XIV Century

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THE CHRISTMAS STORY IN ART

THE Christmas story is the simple tale of the birth of a child in obscure surroundings, as many sons of men are born, but it is also the story of how by a stupendous miracle the Son of God became as childlike as any babe. The story has thrilled all Christians with its most human sentiment and gladdened them with its implied promise of redemption. It has inspired many artists to create their noblest works, as some of the most treasured possessions of the Museum, here illustrated, eloquently testify.

This account is limited to pointing out how artists have represented the Christmastide events so briefly described in the Gospels, and how they gave new meaning and richness to them. For, although these men based their works solidly on the Scriptures, they also made use, consciously or not, of other sources which, together with the Holy Writ, formed the Christmas story in the popular mind. Apocryphal writings, interpretations of theologians, visions of mystics, poetry, folklore, and visual representations in the various arts, such as painting and drama, each had a part in the growth of the narrative.

Although the Nativity—the actual birth of our Lord—was an event of epochal importance, we find that the Gospels treat it in a most summary fashion. Saint Luke, the evangelist to whom we are most indebted, wrote that while Mary was in Bethlehem "the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, . . . and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in

the inn." Fra Angelico's lovely painting (fig. 2), which is typical of Nativities of his time, shows how artists diverged from the biblical text. As Fra Angelico represented the scene it seems that the infant Jesus had just been born, and that there had not been time to wrap Him in swaddling clothes. The mother of God, of all humanity the first to adore her son, kneels before Him, while Joseph dozes. This version of the Nativity closely approximates the description of the event set forth by Saint Bridget of Sweden, in her Revelations. The Gothic mystic gives a vivid account of the vision in which she saw the Virgin kneeling in an ecstasy of contemplation, when in a flash the Child was born. It happened so quickly that the saint saw only the Infant lying naked, spotless, and shining on the earth, and Mary adoring her son with bowed head and hands joined in prayer. From this description one realizes that the countless compositions of the Virgin kneeling in adoration before the Christ Child, for instance the relief by Andrea della Robbia (fig. 5), do not, as is generally believed, merely represent the adoration of the Child, but symbolize that golden moment immediately following the birth of our Lord.

The Adoration of the Shepherds comes next in the sequence of the events of the Christmas story. Saint Luke wrote that as they watched their sheep "the angel of the Lord came upon them, and . . . said unto them, Fear not: for, behold I bring you good tidings of great joy." Then hearing a multitude of the heavenly host in exultant song, the shepherds said one to another, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass. . . . And they came with haste and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger."

A characteristic example, the Adoration of the Shepherds by El Greco (fig. 9), consists of the Nativity figures to which are added caroling angels, and shepherds from the fields. El Greco, however, has not represented Mary simply as the adoring mother, but as the one who, by removing the veil that covered the Christ Child, for the first time revealed to the shepherds, and through them to all mankind, the miraculous

Babe. In accordance with the established usage El Greco portrayed the body of the Christ Child as if it were shining with an inner radiance like another sun, flooding the picture with light. Saint Bridget mentioned that heavenly light filled the Babe's body, and Sedulius, another writer of the Middle Ages, gave poetical expression to this phenomenon when he wrote: "What new light goes now up over the world . . . when Christ in shimmering splendor issues from Mary's womb, . . . more beautiful than any child of men, and with grace and comeliness outpoured over His shining countenance."

Other Adorations of the Shepherds are much the same in composition. One of the most unusual is the illustration in Pigouchet's Horae of 1498 (fig. 10), showing shepherdesses as well as shepherds all labeled with good French names that were certainly borrowed from a contemporary mystery play.

The Adoration of the Magi is celebrated in the Church calendar as the feast of the Epiphany, or Twelfth Night. According to the Gospel of Saint Matthew, "There came wise men from the east to Jerusalem. . . . The star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. . . . And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh."

The Adoration of the Magi (fig. 16) by the painter known as the Master of the Holy Kinship is a characteristic portrayal of the Twelfth Night event. Although the artist closely followed the biblical text, in many ways he advanced beyond it. The Magi, or wise men, for instance, have completely changed their personalities, having become worldly monarchs with all the regal pomp and splendor that kings possess. The pageantry that as a result naturally became part of the scene accounts for much of the vast popularity of the subject. The artist has shown the Madonna enthroned in sumptuous majesty, as befits the mother of God, and holding in her lap the

Christ Child, who is thus enthroned. The eldest of the Magi kneels in the manner of a lesser monarch before a greater one and kisses the foot of this seemingly helpless Babe. Together the three kings—Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar—symbolize what was in the Middle Ages the known world. They also stand for the three ages of man: old age, maturity, and youth.

The Flight into Egypt is the last subject in the sequence of the Christmas story. According to Saint Matthew, the angel of the Lord came to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him." And the text continues, "When he [Joseph] arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt. . . ."

A print (fig. 18) by Schongauer is perhaps the best of all illustrations of a most touching event that occurred on the journey, one of several incidents during the flight into Egypt that are described in the apocryphal *Book of the Childhood of our Lord Jesus*. Once, because His mother was thirsty, the infant Jesus commanded a fig tree to bend to the ground so that with its fruit Mary could slake her thirst. Christ's first miracle was for His mother's sake. Schongauer has represented this scene in a delightful way, showing angels in the act of bending the branches down to Joseph, who is assisting them.

The precipitous journey to Egypt dramatically closes the Christmas cycle and conveys a grim foreboding of sorrowful days to come. Since, for several years afterwards, the Gospels tell us nothing about the life of the Holy Family, this event is an effective curtain to the Christmas drama.

JOHN GOLDSMITH PHILLIPS.

1. The Nativity. Painted terracotta presepe, workshop of Antonio Rossellino. Italian (Florence), about 1470-1480. H. (Virgin) 35 in.

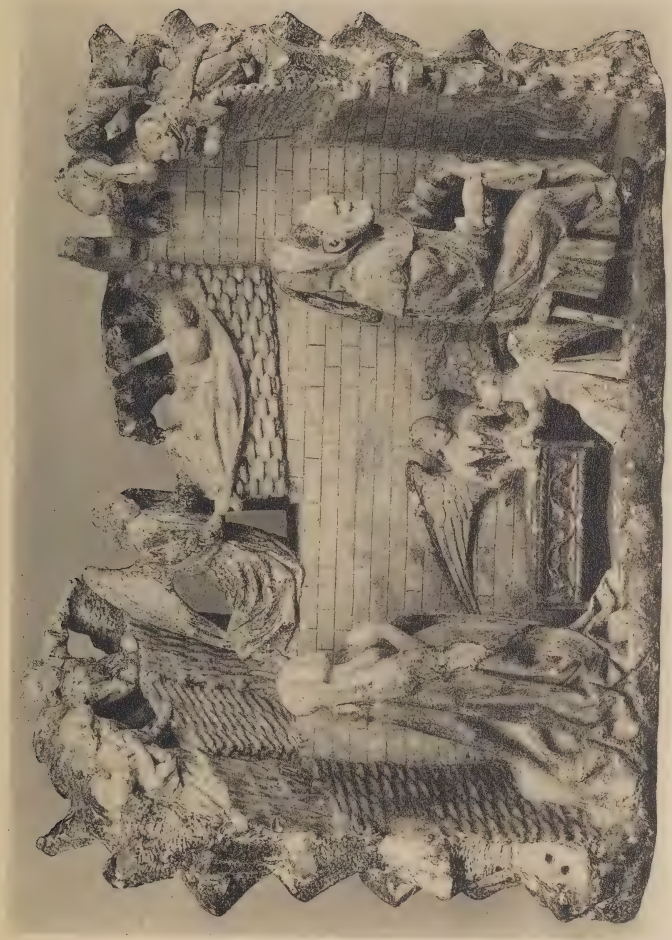
2. The Nativity. Painting by Fra Angelico. Italian (Florence), First Half of the XV Century. H. 15¼ in., w. 11½ in.

3. The Nativity. Painting by Bernardino Fungai. Italian (Siena), Early XVI Century. H. 54⅝ in., w. 39½ in.

4. The Nativity. Leaf of an ivory diptych. French, Middle of the XIV Century. H. 4⅞ in., w. 3⅜ in.

5. The Nativity. Glazed terracotta relief by Andrea della Robbia. Italian (Florence), Second Half of the XV Century. H. 25½ in., w. 17¾ in.

6. The Adoration of the Shepherds. Painting by Andrea Mantegna. Italian (Padua), Second Half of the XV Century. H. 15¾ in., w. 21⅞ in.



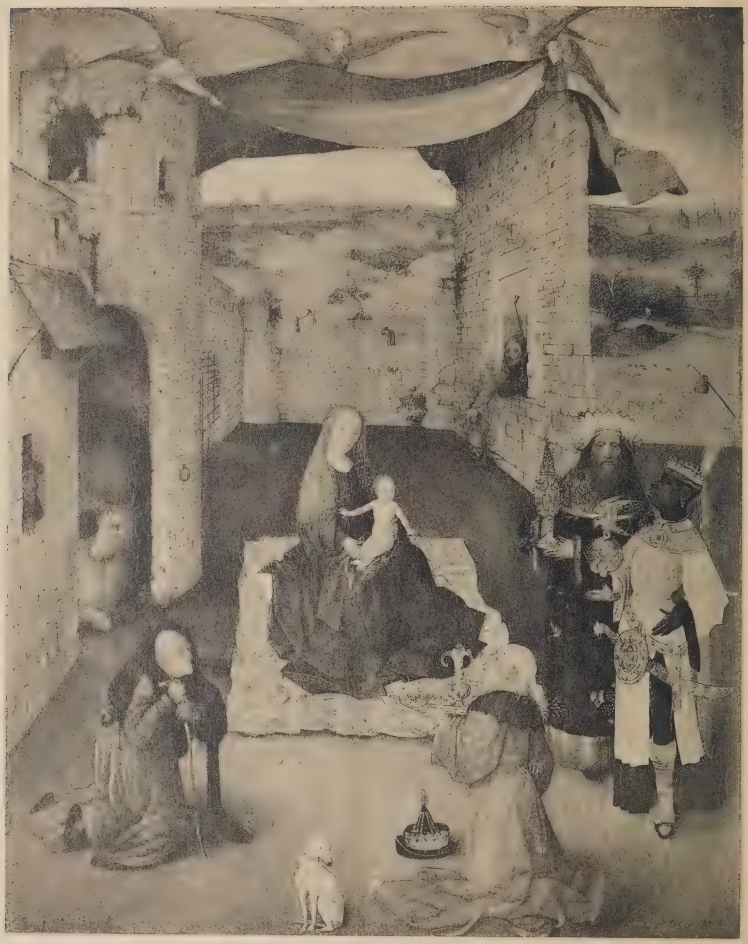
7. The Adoration of the Shepherds. Painted limestone group. French, Middle of the XV Century. H. $17\frac{11}{16}$ in., w. $27\frac{9}{16}$ in.

8. The Adoration of the Shepherds. Painting by Gerard David. Flemish, Late XV Century. H. 18¾ in., w. 13½ in.

9. The Adoration of the Shepherds. Painting by El Greco. Spanish, Early XVII Century. H. 64½ in., w. 42 in.

10. The Adoration of the Shepherds. Metal cut from the "Heures a Lusaige de Romme" printed by Pigouchet in Paris, 1498. H. 4⅞ in., w. 3¼ in.

11. The Adoration of the Magi. Painting, school of Giotto. Italian (Florence), Early XIV Century. H. 17¾ in., w. 17¼ in.



12. The Adoration of the Magi. Painting by Hieronymus Bosch. Flemish, Late XV Century. H. 28 in., w. 22¼ in.

13. The Adoration of the Magi. Painting by Quentin Massys. Flemish, Early XVI Century. H. 37½ in., w. 30¼ in.

14. The Adoration of the Magi. Tapestry. French, Late XV Century. H. 41¾ in., w. 77½ in.

15. The Adoration of the Magi. Engraving by Lucas of Leyden. Netherlandish, 1513. H. $11\frac{13}{16}$ in., w. $17\frac{1}{16}$ in.

16. The Adoration of the Magi. Painting by the Master of the Holy Kinship. German, Early XVI Century. H. 45¾ in., w. 33⅝ in.

17. The Adoration of the Magi. Painting by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. Italian (Venice), about 1753. H. 23¾ in., w. 18¾ in.

18. The Flight into Egypt. Engraving by Martin Schongauer. German, Second Half of the XV Century. H. $9^{15}/_{16}$ in., w. $6^{5}/_{8}$ in.

19. The Flight into Egypt. Woodcut from Albrecht Dürer's "Life of the Virgin." German (Nuremberg), 1511. H. 11¾ in., w. 8⅜6 in.

20. Rest on the Flight into Egypt. Water color by William Blake. British, 1806. H. 13 13/16 in., w. 14 9/16 in.

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